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ABSTRACT

Many believe that dance is a democratizing force in academia. Modern dance history is replete with feminist, homosexual, and racial liberation ideologies transcribed through body language. Experiences in planning cross-discipline courses suggest that, without dance, important aesthetic and sociopolitical ideas most fully revealed in nonverbal and physical ways may be neglected. When planning an interdisciplinary course, "Searching for Truth and Beauty: Perceptions of Reality in Western Arts and Sciences," one professor observed that the course outline, which spanned the history of western civilization, featured only two women, and both were dancers. Dance reinforces the value of imagery, symbol, metaphor and myth, types of knowledge underrated in U.S. culture. Dance should be included in discussions of technology as well as science, because it depends heavily on both education and theater technology, while simultaneously resisting their potentially dehumanizing tendencies. As modern college students ask new questions about racial, cultural, and gender identity, dance provides a link to family, ritual, history, and tradition while displaying tolerance for experimental and alternative approaches to lifestyle, personality, and artistic boundaries. Dancers are aware of the inextricable links between scientific, social, and artistic reality, making them powerful agents for democratic change within interdisciplinary contexts in higher education. (SM)

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THE LEGACY OF DANCE AS A DEMOCRATIZING FORCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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THE LEGACY OF DANCE AS A DEMOCRATIZING FORCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

The idea that dance has been a democratizing force in academia may seem somewhat alien to those outside the discipline, but for generations of dancers in higher education the force has been life-sustaining. Modern dance history is replete with feminist, gay, lesbian and racial liberation ideologies transcribed through a bodily language both subtle and powerful. Experiences in planning cross-discipline courses suggest that, without the inclusion of dance, important aesthetic and socio-political ideas most fully revealed in non-verbal and physical ways may be neglected. When planning the interdisciplinary course "Searching for Truth and Beauty: Perceptions of Reality in Western Arts and Sciences" with faculty from other departments, it was interesting to observe that the two-semester course outline which spanned virtually the entire history of western civilization featured only two women and both were dancers, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham.

Without the inclusion of dance, creative, process-oriented pursuits are sometimes neglected in favor of empirically-derived intellectual products. Dance reinforces the value of imagery, symbol, metaphor and myth, types of knowledge sadly underrated in American culture. Dance should be included in discussions of technology as well as science because it depends heavily on both education and theater technology, while at the same time resisting their potentially dehumanizing tendencies. As the college student of the 21st century asks new questions about racial, cultural and gender identity, dance provides a link to family, ritual, history and tradition while at the same time displaying a rather remarkable tolerance of experimental and alternative approaches to lifestyle, personality and artistic boundaries. The dancer is both restricted and freed by technological advance; the dancer seeks biomechanical and kinesiological scientific understandings; at the same time the dancer depends on the subtler and less quantitative techniques of dramatic expression. In these ways dancers are aware of the inextricable links between scientific, social and artistic reality, making them truly powerful agents for democratic change within interdisciplinary contexts in higher education.

THE LEGACY OF DANCE AS A DEMOCRATIZING FORCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

To suggest that dance has been a democratizing force in academia is, for many outside the field, an alien notion, or else an issue of such minor importance in the larger context of higher education as to warrant little attention. Yet, for generations of dance artists/educators who have carved out territories of integrity and belief together, the force has been life-sustaining and has brought to the forefront valuable modes of inquiry and social activism. Modern dance history, in particular, is replete with feminist, gay, lesbian, and racial liberation ideologies transcribed through a bodily language both subtle and powerful in its physical intelligence. For many dance faculties, not being taken seriously has been a lifelong reality, even when their work ethic, professional expertise and clear relationship to other disciplines is without question. Decade after decade, as dance faculties scan the faces of their eager students they are rewarded with an ever-widening array of body types, movement persuasions, and vocal subgroups which testify to the strength of an art which makes its most profound statements without words, and to the legacy of inclusion which characterizes American dance history.

These ideas take on special significance in interdisciplinary contexts in which combinatory aesthetic and scientific ideas spoken in multiple languages (musical, visual, verbal, physical, mathematical, theoretical) are telling evidence of the ideological biases represented by particular specializations, historical leanings and personalities, even when the participants consciously avoid the promotion of personal agendas. Experiences in planning cross-discipline courses have also led me to believe that without the inclusion of dance, important aesthetic ideas throughout history which are revealed most fully in non-verbal and bodily ways may be neglected or minimized. When planning the course "Searching for Truth and Beauty:

Perceptions of Reality in Western Arts and Sciences" at San Diego State University in San Diego, California, it was interesting to note that in the two-semester course outline devised to treat the major revolutions in artistic and scientific thought, with a very long list of persons spanning the work of Aristotle through Hubble, there were only two women and both were dancers, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. This fact underscored my deep belief in the liberating nature of dance and the power of history to reveal reality on its truest terms.

The first time the course was offered, the team-taught sessions revealed to the students that in ancient Greece (unique in its nascent democratic philosophy), women were not considered citizens but participated in the cultural life of the city-state in ways perhaps significant to the extent that they were a function of the developing Greek tragedy. Although women usually were seated in outlying areas of the theater along with slaves and foreigners, and the female characters on stage were played by men, the emotional richness and profound influence of the great Greek female protagonists cannot be denied. Members of the Greek chorus sang, chanted and danced the fates of those who dared to challenge notions of destiny and divine control. Girls in Greek society were encouraged to become educated in physical skills.[1]

Students in the course grew to understand Greek classical ideals as a function of standards developed by using the human body as measure. The Golden Mean as derived from the Greek interest in proportionate relationships of the parts to the whole and meticulously detailed in the canon of Polyclitus, took on special interest in discussions of the Golden Circle and Golden Square. To create a Golden Circle, one figuratively centers the point of a compass at the navel of the human body and then expects the exterior-most points of the ideal body to all touch the circumference points of a circle when the human figure is laid out spread-eagle. Likewise, the Golden Square is created when the breadth of the ideal body's arm span exactly matches the

height of the figure from heel to top of the head.[2] Visions of the 20th century Balanchine ideal floated in my mind, as well as the lasting nature of idealistic expectations for beautiful bodies in motion, and the unique gifts and discipline required to match such elite specifications.

A special irony surfaces when considering the intellectual prejudice against corporeal approaches to cognitive understanding in American education as compared to the Greeks' apparently more enlightened mind set. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all encouraged attention to the body, its potential for expressing emotions and the need for physical care. Although the arts were less important to Greek life than one might think, dance itself was considered fundamental as a military skill, necessary to the graceful carriage of persons at social events, and beneficial to the education of every citizen.[3]

The Baroque era acknowledged a male standard of physical beauty, grace and refinement as important as the standard set in classical Greece. Louis XIV's cultivation of his own beauty and his nurturance of dance theory and instruction led to the founding of the Royal Academy of Dance which glorified the expressive and decorative potential of ballet.[4] Several years after the founding of the Academy women began to appear on stage and establish a place for themselves in European cultural life so pronounced that the prima ballerina would become an icon of 19th century Romanticism.[5]

Another course entitled "Twentieth Century Revolutions: The Arts, Society and the Individual" was created by the artist-component of this interdisciplinary team which identified connections among radical changes in the arts as they were evidenced in political history, the emergence of brilliant minds and representative masterworks in the 20th century. It was enlightening to focus on the rise of the Ballets Russes, the artistic and romantic relationship of Diaghilev and Nijinsky and how the interaction of these forces, along with the genius of

collaborators such as Stravinsky and Picasso, established the new aesthetic of modernism, as libertarian in its social ideals as it was in artistry. Discussions of the Merce Cunningham and John Cage relationship as both an artistic as well as a romantic one, addressed a period of even greater openness to changing social mores and aesthetic structures. The latter part of the course focused on the importance of a free society to both the fermentation and distribution of artistic ideas. Included was a consideration of censorship in closed political systems, the repression of modern artists by the Nazis, and patterns of defunding of controversial artists by the National Endowment for the Arts, most specifically those whose work addressed gay and lesbian issues. Dance and the other arts offered a haven for those wishing to challenge various class-based, racial, gender and ideological stereotypes which limit free expression.

Later, I provided a guest lecture for a general education configuration united under the category of Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences and Communication and Critical Thinking: Composition. The professors on this team represented the departments of history, religious studies and world music. The course syllabus indicated that the students investigated self-identity as a function of several contemporary models of understanding, and that diversity of self-identity was a trademark of recent and evolving world culture. The guest session defined modern dance and distinguished it from other forms of western theatrical dance by considering some pivotal individuals who created identities through this new, 20th century medium. Discussions included Isadora Duncan who knew as a young girl that she wanted a feminist lifestyle unfettered by the marital and cultural expectations of the period; Ted Shawn who paved the way for men in American dance, fighting deeply entrenched gender biases experienced by men dancers; Hanya Holm who escaped Nazi control and rescued Mary Wigman's radical dance theories from extermination in Germany; Martha Graham who resisted the exclusivity and

rigidity of Puritanism and the male political establishment; and lastly, Donald McKayle, choreographer of *"Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder"*. A video of this masterwork inspired discussion of Alvin Ailey and the manner in which he addressed racial identity and the quest for black liberation unique to the mid-twentieth century. These examples pointed to the remarkable mix of identities true to the experience of most modern dancers who function so effortlessly in highly heterogeneous settings.

Including dance as an academic subject area deserving prominence is also important to the extent that in higher education, creative, process-oriented disciplines are sometimes neglected in favor of empirically-derived intellectual products. The choreographic process can appear to be as systematic as the scientific method, but in dance, thought, feeling and physicality unite in an intuitive trial-and-error quest for authentic, appropriate and kinesthetically logical movement. The combination of creative process and emotional and psychological investigation as revealed in a purely physical language makes for an academic endeavor distinctly unique and powerful. The academic omission or exclusion of a medium dependent on purely physical expressive language is wrong. So much of the history of dance has concerned itself with the debate over what constitutes inherently beautiful movement, therefore making it one of the most appropriate disciplines to include in cross-cultural explorations of beauty. Dance is also one of the easiest of the disciplines to address in terms of truth, for when a dance language ceases to truthfully represent the social and emotional values stored away in a group's collective muscle memory it either grows in a new direction or dies.

Dance is also important to the extent that it reinforces the value of imagery, symbol, metaphor and myth, types of knowledge sadly underrated in American culture. It was intriguing for me to render some of the scientific explanations of the earlier-described course into

movement pictures that took on a life of their own. The scientist's talk about the relative speeds of cylinders rolling down an inclined plane and how their varied contents, ranging from solid or liquid, caused them to go faster or slower, not based on the weight of the contents but on viscosity, sent this listener's mind into choreographic imagery rather than real applications (having once made a dance in which bodies rolled down ramps angled off of platforms). As the scientist discussed Galileo, the physics of projectiles and parabolic trajectories, visions appeared comparing images of the relative distances of the *grand jetes* if one put Nijinsky, Nureyev and Baryshnikov all on the same stage, having launched them from the wings.

To include dance in academic discussions of the technological revolution in education is also extremely important. Dance depends on technology (that of education as well as technical theater) while at the same time resisting its mechanical and dehumanizing tendencies. Dance can expand its own possibilities by exploring technology, while at the same time resisting the inactive, sedentary conditions associated with its use. As the college student of the 21st century asks new questions about racial, cultural and gender identity, dance provides a link to family, ritual, history and tradition while at the same time displaying a rather remarkable tolerance of experimental and alternative approaches to lifestyle, personality and artistic boundaries.

Throughout collaborative endeavors it is satisfying to consider how easily dance lends itself to inclusion. Dance most often involves all the senses at the same time, as a whole body/whole mind sort of experience. The dancer is actor/athlete, with the heart and the body laid bare for criticism and analysis, as well as appreciation. The dancer seeks the scientific understanding of biomechanics and kinesiology as well as the subtler and less quantitative techniques of dramatic expression. In this way dancers are aware, by necessity, of the inextricable links between scientific, social and artistic reality, making them truly powerful

agents for democratic change.

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